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Celebrity Curators: Presenters Turn to High-Profile Dance Artists To Inspire New Programming Directions [Part 1]

March 29, 2018

Editor's note: This is part 1 of a two-part series. Stay tuned for part 2 and hear from more celebrated dancers who are curating performances.

By Steve Sucato



Dancers curating dance programs isn't new. But the recent frequency and visibility of high-profile dance artists creating full programs appears to be on the rise.

Whether for charitable causes, festivals or for their own independent touring productions, high-profile dancers and choreographers are capitalizing on their celebrity by curating and producing their own programming. Among those who have crossed over into artistic curation: National Ballet of Canada principal dancer Sonia Rodriguez (*A Ballerina's Legacy*); American Ballet Theatre principal Daniil Simkin (*Intensio*); and New York City Ballet principals Daniel Ulbricht (*Stars of American Ballet*) and Ashley Bouder (*Ashley Bouder Project*).

And knowing a good thing when they see one, more dance presenting organizations have signed on by hiring "name-brand" dancers and choreographers to curate programming for them, including Misty Copeland.



"Having artists at the center of the conversation gives an inside view and [adds] excitement that non-artists don't necessarily possess," said Meg Booth, director of dance programming at The Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., which in 2017 invited ABT principal **Misty Copeland** and NYCB choreographer **Justin Peck** to curate two programs in the Opera House.

More than just a celebrity endorsement, guest curators are integral in creating and managing those projects from start to finish. That can mean choosing program themes, dance and music artists, repertory, and program order.

Putting Artists at the Center of the Conversation

In the case of The Kennedy Center's popular *Ballet Across America* series, Booth said selecting Peck and Copeland as curators came about because of "balance and opportunity." Balance, in that Booth wanted a male and a female voice as well as a dancer's and choreographer's voice. Opportunity, in that the center has had a longstanding relationship with both companies, as well as with Copeland and Peck.

In keeping with The Kennedy Center's new strategic plan that calls for putting artists at the center of the conversation, Booth said the *Ballet Across America* series was the perfect opportunity to implement that initiative and to invite artists to curate. The result: two programs demonstrating what the Copeland and Peck saw as most exciting in dance today.

"One of the reasons we chose Misty [Copeland] is she represents a conversation in dance that is long overdue: creating more diversity onstage," said Booth. "She chose companies that she is aware of that have championed diversity." In an interview with "ABC News" Copeland said: "I really wanted to represent myself on the stage and to be able to give these companies and dancers that are African-American or are minorities an opportunity to be seen at a high level and be on the Kennedy Center stage. The more diversity we see, the more relevant the ballet world is going to be for American people."



New Works Seen Through a Dancer's Eyes

Booth said she selected Peck because he is one of the most sought-after choreographers working and has traveled broadly and has seen a lot of what is going on in dance across the country. "I've been exercising a different part of my brain," Peck told *The Washington Post* about his curatorial experience. In curating his *Ballet Across America* program, he said he selected works and companies he admired creating a "personal-taste sort of program."

For Pamela Tatge, director of the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, the choice of tapper **Michelle Dorrance** to oversee a tap evening was less about her celebrity and more about "her enthusiasm for the work she was seeing around the world in tap and wanting American audiences to really have a deeper understanding of the trajectory of this quintessentially American form."

After conversations Tatge had with Dorrance following a 2016 appearance by Dorrance Dance at Jacob's Pillow, she said, "That's when I had the idea: 'Why don't we get to see the things you get to see and why don't you [Dorrance] curate an evening for us.'"



"My vision for this program was simple," said Dorrance. "I wanted an audience that had not been exposed to much tap dance or to very many tap dance artists to experience the great range in styles found in tap artists today, as well as the great depth of possibility found in tap's tradition."

As with Copeland and Peck, this was Dorrance's first experience curating. "As an artist and a member of the tap dance community, I had been in the room and on the wood with each of those I invited to be a part of the show," she said. "I had seen them perform and rehearse their own work and the work of others in many different environments. I invited these particular artists because of the purity of their intention in, respect for, and passion for, what they do."

Like The Kennedy Center and Jacobs Pillow, The Music Center's President and CEO Rachel Moore said with both the *BalletNOW™* programs the Los Angeles center has presented, including New York City Ballet principal dancer **Tiler Peck's** July 2017 program, "We were able to provide dancers whom we believe have an interesting artistic point of view and who appreciate the opportunity to share their vision with a broader audience."

Tiler Peck's desire to blend ballet with other genres to highlight the versatility of today's ballet dancers while engaging audiences with new forms of dance was the reason she was selected, according to Moore. And her ties to the Los Angeles area also helped. "We felt that this forward-looking approach would be refreshing and would be welcomed by Southern California audiences," said Moore.

"It took me a year of planning because, for me personally, the dancers and pieces needed to be of equal importance," said Ms. Peck. "While I think most masterpieces can stand alone, I do believe that a certain dancer can make or break a piece. Therefore, if the dancer I had in mind to dance a certain piece was unavailable, then I didn't want to showcase that piece in the program this time around."

Bringing Fresh Ideas to the Presenter's Table

Presenters interviewed all noted that having well-known dance artists curate dance programs provided a means of injecting new blood, fresh ideas, and excitement into their seasons. But they all noted that these largely inexperienced curators did not receive *carte blanche* in the process.

"I didn't give them full autonomy but I did give them a lot of flexibility," said Booth. "There were some choices that didn't make sense so I vetoed one or two things because they weren't in the spirit of Ballet Across America. For the most part, I really did want to give them the opportunity to tell the story they wanted to tell."

Both Justin Peck and Copeland were new to curating a major program like *Ballet Across America*. Booth described many conversations and emails between all parties that helped guide them in the process. These communications focused on items such as what theme, their singular goals for their programs, and what The Kennedy Center was able to accomplish during the performance week.

"When you start bringing in that many companies in one place at one time, the logistical demands on the technical staff and on the companies that are coming and going is a pretty significant undertaking," explained Booth. And while Booth, Peck, and Copeland worked together on identifying the artists for the two *Ballet Across America* programs, The Kennedy Center handled all the booking, travel, lodging, and logistical arrangements.



Similarly, Moore said, "in the big picture, The Music Center is ultimately responsible for what is programmed on its stages. That said, this is about teamwork. Tiler [Peck] is a highly collaborative artist, which is what makes a program such as *BalletNOW™* so successful. We sit down with our artist partners to conceptualize the program and then put a plan in place together to realize it."

"I honestly was given complete artistic freedom, in collaboration with the Music Center's CEO and producer, which was absolutely amazing," Tiler Peck added. "The hardest thing to navigate was the rehearsal schedule because of time limitations. I programmed fifteen different ballets on the three evenings, but we only had two days to rehearse all of the pieces with the orchestra."

Dorrance, too, said she was given complete freedom in selecting the artists and works presented. "We [Jacob's Pillow] had in mind a general budget for this project and we worked with Michelle [Dorrance] on how many of the artists she was interested in we could afford to bring in due to travel expenses," said Tatge. "What was wonderful is she got her A list. Before she made offers, I screened who she wanted to bring in and approved her list."

What are presenters seeking in hiring high-profile dancers as curators? Must those dancer/curators be squarely in the public eye?

“It wouldn’t be a necessary quality, but I think it is helpful,” Tatge said. “You are not only using that person’s experience but also their name to help draw people in to see something that they may not have otherwise ventured to. Because that invitation comes from someone you know, you are more likely to take that risk.”

To read more on dance artists and curation, including comments from Isabelle Boylston and James Sofranko, and advice on what presenters and dance artists should think about, come back for part two.



A former dancer turned arts writer and critic living in Ohio, **Steve Sucato** studied ballet and modern dance with Arline Ashton Hay, Robert Steele, Patricia Heigel-Tanner, and Kathy Short Gracenin. During his dance career he performed numerous classical and contemporary roles sharing the stage with noted dancers Robert LaFosse, Antonia Franceschi, Stacy Caddell, Joseph Duell, Robert Wallace, Sandra Brown and Mikhail Baryshnikov. Sucato has a degree in communications from The Pennsylvania State University and is chairman emeritus of the Dance Critics Association, an international association of dance journalists. His writing credits include articles and reviews on dance and the arts for The Plain Dealer (Cleveland), The Buffalo News (Buffalo), Pittsburgh City Paper (Pittsburgh), Erie Times-News (Erie), ArtVoice (Buffalo) and Dance Magazine, Pointe, Dance International, Dance Studio Life, Dance Teacher, among others. On the web you can find his writing in [ExploreDance.com](#), DanceTabs, BalletCo, and Ballet-Dance Magazine. Steve is also associate editor of [ExploreDance](#) and the creator of the arts blog [Arts Air](#).

Photo credits

Photo 1: Complexions Contemporary Ballet in Dwight Rhoden's *Star Dust* in *Ballet Across America*. Photo by Teresa Wood

Photo 2: L.A. Dance Project in Benjamin Millepied's *Hearts & Arrows* in *Ballet Across America*. Photo by Teresa Wood.

Photo 3: Joseph Wiggan and Josette Wiggan-Freund in *Harmony: Tap in Motion* in *TIRELESS: A Tap Dance Experience* at Jacob's Pillow. Photo by Christopher Duggan.

Photo 4: Reona Seo and Takashi Seo in *AUN* in *TIRELESS: A Dance Experience* at Jacob's Pillow Photo Christopher Duggan.

Photo 5: Tiler Peck performs *1-2-3-4-5-6* with Michelle Dorance, Virgil "Lil O" Gadson and Byron Tittle as part of The Music Center's *BalletNOW*. Photo courtesy of The Music Center.

Photo 6: Photo courtesy of the author.

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